

A Climbing Stock

Preview

1. A Climbing Stock

Once leprechauns sang just within earshot. If you ran fast enough and could knot the rainbow around the old maple, the golden pot was yours. Once, but not this time--

Today, John strode past his visiting mother, knotted his tie around the doorknob, snapped open the briefcase, took out a ledger filled with red numbers, left, and came back with a tray full of Mother's cookies and lemonade. He turned on the calculator and took a drink.

"You're an idiot," Mother said helpfully.

John pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, thumbing through the pages.

"Thanks." He answered distractedly, setting this month's disaster down on the piano's music rack. The walnut fallboard covering the keys gave a pleasant thrum as his fingers drummed on it.

"Your father was the same way." Mother continued. She crossed the living room with a hammer snap of her heels. Her dress stayed still as she walked, every line displayed exactly as in this month's Vogue. No wrinkle dared reveal itself. It would remain proper. It would know its place. She smiled. The bright red

slashes emphasized power. The ruffles at her wrists failed to soften the look. Her diamonds looked primed to cut glass.

John sat down on a corner of the piano bench. The wood looked dark against his skin. This month's tallies glared at him, daring him to play them into harmony or improvise them into something beautiful. He shuffled pages, flexed his fingers, and then slumped his shoulders, turning instead to gaze at the offered cookies on their silver tray. A rip in one of the curtains distracted him. He swirled lemonade hoping that would be helpful.

"It's good to be home." John mumbled.

"Harrumph." Mother harrumphed. They watched each other.

Mother downed her lemonade like whiskey in a shot glass. Then, she stood very still and turned her head. A white linen tablecloth dared to flutter on the dining room table. Hands went to hips and she nearly took a step. The fabric froze... caught. She glared it into submission. It fell straight and resisted the breeze from the damnable air conditioner vent.

The most remarkable thing about the Fasola-Sprat home was that it was completely devoid of perpendicular angles, not by design, but because the foundation had sunk... given in. From the outside, it glistened with a new coat of paint, its granite walkways were freshly scrubbed, and its lawn so meticulously kept that people often wondered if a gardener had at it with a toenail clipper, but inside despite Mother's vigilant efforts wear began to show.

The prestige item of the living room was a deeply burnished grand piano. It vibrated and glistened with the need to put on a show, but like the house it was a bit of an illusion. The thing hadn't been tuned in twenty years and hadn't been played for at least five. Its bench didn't even close properly, but that was because John Fasola used it as an in-box.

Overall, the house had the feeling of a scrapbook. It was definitely one that "was". Even the windows sagged, milky and foggy. John glanced at Mother through the reflection of his glass and toasted her with the lemonade.

"Did you put any sugar in this at all?" John said, dipping his finger into the glass. It came back puckered.

"The way you look I'm not sure if your blood pressure could stand the sugar."

John looked up and smiled.

"Then why the cookies?"

"Sell the business, John."

He choked.

"I can't sell the family business"

"It's not a sacred cow, John." Mother sternly informed.

John looked up and smiled. He swept a few hairs off his jacket and stared at the twenty-year old marketing texts neatly stacked and freshly book-marked in a corner of his living room. The bookcase he walked to practically bulged with mail and forgotten recipes for success. He pulled out an assortment of papers, charts and letters as if they were proof that he knew what he was doing. After all, look how much paper he had accumulated. The endless stacks had to mean something.

Mother stood over him. Her arms crossed. John looked past her at a photo of his father that hung askew on the wall. His voice was resolute, even though it cracked.

"I can't sell the family business," He had been saying that sentence a lot recently. Mother didn't harrumph which made John exceedingly nervous. Taking a deep breath, he walked over to the piano, lifted the fallboard and plunked out a few notes, before realizing it was the beginning of a blues song and stopped immediately. "It would be like selling the family."

"Sell it now while the pieces are still worth something."

"God, this lemonade is bad."

"I gave birth for this?"

John lifted the lid of the piano bench and thumbed again through the reports filed there. Desperately, he searched.

"It's here somewhere!" he growled.

Mother released her white-knuckled grip from a slatted chair and checked her texts. Menace filled her smile. Then, she glided towards the ledger. Her son, alarmed, hurried with a poorly disguised attempt at nonchalance to intercept her.

"Aha!" he said, pulling a sheet. "We claimed a profit in the third quarter of..."

"Son" she said patiently, "You make rotary dials. No one dials anymore."

"I've expanded the business, Mom."

"Oh yes, I forgot. You make turntable needles."

"Dad would never sell the business."

Mother picked up the tray and ground the uneaten cookies into dust. She turned and picked up a photo of Dad and John.

"Your father loved to take you fishing. He loved that old fishing pole. Man refused to use bait." She studied her son before continuing, "'Digital is the devil,' he used to say. 'Analog is the only way.' Your father was an idiot too."

"Digital only records the high and low registers. True music lovers can never be satisfied by digital. It's a fad, Mom. The idea of an album is too important. Everyone knows the best music is always on side B." John countered, rubbing away more hair. He only shed when she visited.

Mother nodded, took the ledger from his grip, and nodded again. She walked to her suitcase. John winced when she pulled out her tablet. She tapped out the numbers and made some projections. A few pie charts, a few line graphs later, she took off her glasses and closed the ledger. John took a step backwards.

"But, Mom," John tried, "Remember when we sold 40,000 slide rules..."

"Y2K was a long time ago, Johnny," she shook her head, "I will not go through bankruptcy. I will make some calls and set up a meeting. 'Slide rules,' he tells me. The factory has got to be worth something. Can I trust you to sign the papers?"

"Mom. The family business."

Mother shoved the graphs towards him.

She would never understand. Not the mother who bought her clothes straight out of Harper's Bazaar all the while complaining that the magazine was falling behind the times and needed to work harder at following the micro-trends. Not when she budgeted hundreds of dollars every week to tint and poof her hair so she could look more like a TV reality housewife. The Corporation of Ordinary Wares had never been fashionable enough for mother.

John willed away a headache. That too, had become all too common.



When John turned sixteen his father put him in a car and showed his son what he called "the starving towns." He drove slowly to give his boy a chance to memorize the faces of people idling on broken stoops staring out as blankly as the residents of a nursing home. There wasn't much light in their eyes.

"They were abandoned, son, some of them twenty years ago." Dad rolled down the window to let the dust in. The ghosts of worn town houses with boarded windows, broken boards, and cracked sidewalks filled his memory.

"A factory is like a heart, boy. When it dies or is chopped up, everything around it dries up." Father slowed the car to drive by a washed-out family in grayed clothing. "Look at them, John. The Corporation of Ordinary Wares is more... She kept folks fed in the depression and she keeps their blood warm now. Without the Wares..." His father looked away, "Look how long it's been since these houses were painted. How long do you think it's been since their Corporation betrayed them? Every town needs its heart. We must do everything we can to keep it beating."



Mother slammed the ledger closed.

"I'll make the call tomorrow," Mother decided.

Dad affectionately called Mother "the clog."

John turned away and went upstairs. It took all his strength not to slam the door. Mother smiled and shook her finger at her husband's photograph. "Idiot," she said and turned to the liquor cabinet. From behind the door rose a sulky shout.

"Nostalgia is in. You'll see."

Mother looked at her husband's image again then turned her attention to the closed door before downing a shot of bourbon.

"He's your son," she told the ghost.



The man tried hard not to laugh when he looked over the assets. He complained of restructuring costs, severance pay, retraining fees, the useless backlog of inventory. John grabbed the cuffs of his best navy suit and sat through it all. In his mind, he sailed back in time to a time when... actually, he traveled to a place that never existed. A time of noble businessmen who sat around an Arthurian round table where each man was equal and worked towards a fair and just... for some reason in his mind's eye his mother looked a little like Morgan Le Fey just then. These men and women then, with their ironically round boardroom table and standard of black and pinstriped gray, were the black knights.

They cared nothing for the heart of a town.

Worse, they even had the effrontery to deny him the Grand Hall. This meeting was held in a regional office. The Mid-Atlantic office. The Corporation for Ordinary Wares deserved better.

On the ride over, leaves fell. Not in a rush of gold and ruby, but a cascade of brittle brown. Each crunchy step felt like the breaking of bones, like he was walking over a field of corpses. The building was suitably tall, 17 stories, but when he told them who he was, they didn't even offer to park his car. They told him to take his Volvo down to the basement lot. He complied, took the elevator (the faux marble walls were nice) to the ground floor and was told to go to Conference Room L on the thirteenth floor.

Conference Room L? The thirteenth floor! He huffed. *The Corporation for Ordinary Wares deserves at least a Conference Room B!*

A stout receptionist in a gray skirt and an oversized white blouse greeted him. She got him a cup of coffee with sugar and apologized when he asked for cream.

"We have non dairy creamer." She offered and closed the door.

The conference room was half full. The men looked like they had been part of a semi-successful cloning experiment. Only their hairlines differed. The table sparkled, all glass and aluminum while the light fizzed down from a series of small spotlights on the ceiling. The air stiffened. Champagne was nowhere in sight.

Their offer was nearly a hundred pages long, but half the men in the room weren't even listening to the presentation. They just gleefully tapped away at their smartphones and occasionally nodded. The lone woman of the room had the grace to cover her mouth as she yawned. John played the role of a supplicant. They were doing him a favor.

Six fountain pens lay in the center of the table. John was sure they were filled with blood. Some of the pages already looked signed.

This was not a foregone conclusion! John would have a say! He took a deep breath and straightened up. If he had to sell he would get the best price he could.

The man in the grayest suit repeated his last point, dramatically punching the table. John jumped.

Unnoticed, a little man seated on the water cooler laughed. One might imagine he sprang from a dew drop of color clinging from the faucet. The kind that refused to let go. He was not quite natural. For one thing, his head was barely the size of one of the cooler's air bubbles. For another, he was enjoying himself. His heels kicked, causing tiny ripples in the water. His hands clapped. Yet, the sound never carried. It might not have occurred to the little man that this was certainly not a place to have fun. John certainly bore a grim face. Even his counterparts in their stiff gray suits all wore dour, bored expressions. Yet the little man smiled. Why even hair curled like a toddler's laugh as it crept out from his broad-brimmed hat. Plainly speaking, the nonsense and blather these gray suited office sirs prattled on about tickled him. On and on, they kept going ignoring the glazed eyes and nodding heads. It was as if the plan was to bore John into submission. When the gray man pulled out the same chart for the fourth time, the little man stuck out his tongue and made a face. No one stirred or noticed and so he turned and waggled his buttocks at them, then giggled again. When someone finally turned to locate the source of the sound the little man wiggled down the spigot.

They made their offer.

It would have been a fair offer in 1929 after the crash, unless you consider inflation. John stammered, tried to rise and felt his legs give way. The rumpled, heavy man in the Brooks Brothers smirked as he presented his Indigo pen.

John trembled. His color became yellow. The offer actually made him physically ill. The woman offered her hand to help him up; he refused to take it, afraid it might signify agreement. He excused himself.

Outside, he kicked a water fountain. Then, remembering some old rule kicked it twice more. The little man materialized behind him. John turned. The wee man stepped lightly to the side. He stood exactly behind John's narrow shoulders and shadowed the larger man's movement to ensure he remained unseen. John massaged his temples and slapped himself lightly.

"Think," John urged himself. Behind him, the wee man vigorously rubbed his hands together. With each stroke, the little man grew a foot. He stopped when he reached his fourth foot.

"Jack," he finally said. John turned around and jumped. There had been no one there. The wee man waited. John smiled uncomfortably and pinched the bridge of his nose, then smiled, trying to ignore his start and the sudden pounding in his heart, so as not to appear rude.

"It's John, no one calls me Jack."

"John then. It's a shame what they do. I knew your father. Hard worker, good man, your father," the little man began.

"You think I should take their offer?"

"Oh by the... Well no, your father wouldn't accept a poor deal like that. Your father made one hell of a deal with my kin. He wouldn't have told you the story. It was part of the deal."

The small man circled the fountain, and when he caught his reflection, groomed himself smoothing his hair and straightening his collar.

"John," he continued, then paused, "I can't call you that. Are you sure I can't call you Ja... as you will." He pursed his lips and hummed a strange bouncy tune, then raised a finger. "Johnny, then." He clapped in approval of the compromise and looked back over his shoulder at the boardroom. It was silent inside, almost as if the men and women ceased to exist the moment John had left. The wee man nodded and took a step forward, thrusting out a hand. "You were shrewd to leave, Johnny. If you come back they'll sweeten the pot..." the wee man choked. "Offer," he amended quickly.

"You've a better offer?"

"I told them you'd be shrewd. Just like your old father. A Johnny to the core." That seemed to amuse him. "You know how they are mapping, just finished mapping, the human genome, Johnny," John nodded.

“You’re a talker, Johnny. I like that. My family has the new company. You’ve heard of BEAN, haven’t you?”

“Bean?”

“Biomicroscopy Endoscopic Arterial Neurosurgery. BEAN. You’ve heard of it.”

“I’m afraid I...”

“Not much of a player are you, Johnny. Don’t watch the news either, I bet. BEAN is big, as big as the rest of all of biotech put together. I’m authorized to offer you a substantial share in the company.”

“BEAN, I don’t know.”

“We IPO in a week. Everything is set. The only problem is we need plastics. We need a factory to make the bottles to put the medicine in. You’ve got space and you’ve equipment designed to handle heavy plastics, light plastics... Do you see what I’m offering?”

John stared at the little man. He looked polished. Emerald cufflinks twinkled. A pressed Armani suit accented with a silk bow tie so green it smelled like a spring garden. Even the wrinkles in his broad face looked pleated. His voice was warm and seductive. John backed away from him. If something sounds too good...

“You’re offering me a partnership. A share of your company for...”

“Oh no,” the man laughed with a laugh that would have embarrassed Santa Claus. “I’m offering you 3,000 shares of BEAN for your company.”

“You’re offering me 3k of BEANS for my company?”

“Sounds familiar doesn’t it, Ja... Johnny. We’ve done this dance before. Your family always makes out well. I get what I want and you get to take care of your mother in style.”

John turned towards the door to go back to the conference room. A sudden stiff, dry, air-conditioned gust made him shiver. His heart still had not settled.

“Your father had the balls to throw the dice, Johnny. This is your chance to choose a road. You take a step into that room and I will rescind my offer. Oh, you just take their offer and continue down your safe path with your mother looking down her nose at you. You were willing to hold on, weren’t you? You were willing to hold for love or faith. Your father would be ashamed of you for taking the pennies they’re offering.”

John hesitated. His fingers urged him to turn the knob and take the deal Mother had arranged, but there was something in the little man’s stance, some cockiness that he longed to echo.

“I need to call my broker” John said.

“Sure, call your broker,” the little man sneered. He said nothing for a moment and just stood there as if he were searching for something inside John. John took a step backwards. A wistful smile widened the wee man’s cheeks. Then, he took one of the emerald shamrocks off his lapel and handed it to John. “There was a time when family meant something, my boy. I came here to do you a favor for your father’s sake, for old time’s sake, but you’re right. You are no Jack. Take the pin. It’s worth more than the trifle they’re offering you. I have to give you something for all the times your family gave me.” The twinkle faded from his eyes. “I never thought I’d see the day when a Jack turned down an offer of beans. I suppose luck is truly dead.”

John felt the weight of the pin. He opened the door, stared at the dour, rumpled faces in their sterile off-white room, they turned slowly as if time was defrosting, and then back at the slumping, suddenly old man walking towards the elevator. John turned and ran.

“Wait,” John said, putting his arm around the man’s shoulders. The leprechaun perked up.

“You’ve made the right choice, Jack,” he said, snatching the pin back.

“My mother’s going to kill me.”

“She always does, Jack. She always does.” The wee man giggled as Jack signed the papers.



Needless to say, John's mother packed up her things and left. Not only did the contract offer only 3,000 shares, it subsumed none of the company's debt. The offering price was set at 15 dollars. That meant that John turned down an offer that would have given him \$250,000 clear for a stock speculation that put the family \$2,700,000 in debt.

Mother was too angry to even call him an idiot.

In the morning, John watched CNBC eagerly. BEAN opened poorly and by the end of the day was only worth ten dollars a share. John listened to the self-assured, pompous advisors laugh about how this nowhere stock was the most unready company to go public that anyone could remember. "What do they do? No one knows," Martin Brotheau laughed. "Plus, what serious issue engages in the takeover of a bankrupt company riddled with debt and horribly obsolete machinery a week before going public. I really feel sorry for the people who underwrote this."

John turned off the TV. He went upstairs and called his accountant.

"If I sell everything, Terry. Yeah, the house, too, if I sell everything, can I come out of this?" Terry didn't answer. John heard his breathing so he knew Terry was still there.

"There are a few tricks, John. We can hold off the wolves for a little while, but yeah, I would start liquidating your hard assets. I figure we have to the end of the quarter before... how are you at picking lottery numbers, John?"

John slammed the receiver. He pictured his mother living on the streets. He could get her a good cardboard box. One near the best hot air vent in the city. He could at least do that much.



His liquor cabinet was empty by morning. He passed out. During the next two days, he only recovered long enough to stumble to the bathroom before collapsing somewhere in the living room. The smell of vomit and gin permeated the house, especially between the keys of the piano.

When he could see and stand, he saw his answering machine held 127 voice messages.

"Hello, John... this is Terry. Something's going on with that stock. It's got a good pop on no news. It hit 20. I think you should sell before the money managers start taking profits."

"Hey John, Terry. I hope you didn't get around to selling. This stock is shooting up like a weed, man. It's at 50. Jesus, 30 points in two hours. What do you know about this? Can you tell me anything?"

"John. Where are you? I think there's something wrong with my computer. This just can't be right. I'll give Ferris Baker a call and see if they can verify..."

And the BEAN stock kept rising and rising for two days until...

"Hello, John, we've got to consider some tax shelters my man! This stock is higher than W. Buffet. I don't know why you haven't called back yet. We're still... I'm still your guy, right? Come on, just 'cause you're a multi- multimillionaire is no reason (beep)"

"Me again. We've been through a lot. I knew your father. Come on, pick up. I didn't hold it against you that you never tipped me off about this BEAN stock. I mean, shit, this stock is rising through the roof... It's sky high. Okay, I know what you're thinking, but I've some big clients. I can handle you. Maybe I could've done more to save the business. I admit that I made some mistakes, but you know I've worked hard for you... How many honest accountants do you think there are out there!"

John scratched his head and wondered if he was still drunk. He rolled off the piano bench, crawled to the antique wicker sofa to lever himself up, and went to the front door. He picked up the three morning papers piled there and a gift-wrapped bottle of champagne. The champagne was from Terry. BEAN was on the front page.

Stock Soars. From 15 to 5,000 in Two Days. Will the BEAN Stock Ever Stop Growing? As John started to faint, he saw his mother open a cab door. For the first time he could remember, she looked happy. Dimly he heard his mother shout, "Tell me that for once in your life you were smart. Tell me you didn't sell. Fifteen million dollars! Fifteen million dollars!"

